

Women Leaders Network of APEC: From Call to Action to Our Second Decade

by

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If you say that globalization is hurting women, it is because you are not preparing her. I see the potential, how I can ride the crest of the wave and not submerge myself under it...I think a bigger world is where women have a better chance.' Muhammad Yunus, Co-Chair, State of the World Forum. Yunus also gives credit to the forces of globalization, namely the technological revolution in bringing women of the world closer together

This year, Vietnam is hosting the 10th anniversary and 11th meeting of the Women Leaders Network of APEC. As we celebrate our birthday, it is time to reflect on our past achievements and activities and create our visions for heading into our second decade.

Launched in Manila in October, 1996 as the Network of Senior Women Leaders from APEC Economies, the genesis of the Network lies with the Indonesian Institute of Science and Technology which organized the International Workshop on Women and Technology in Southeast Asia and the Pacific in January, 1996 where the importance of APEC as a point of intervention for women and gender was first recognized.

This meeting was followed by another in March, 1996 when senior women leaders from the public and private sectors in science and technology with expertise on the gender dimension in trade, investment and development cooperation met in Jakarta to determine how gender issues and interests could be integrated within the APEC process. Since this was the year when the Philippines was hosting all APEC meetings, our friends from the Philippines rallied their various departments and NGO's and with funding provided by the Canadian International Development Agency, planning meetings took place and the Network was launched in October, 1996, one month before the APEC Leaders Summit. We convened for the first time and met under the ambitious theme of 'Gender, Trade and Investment Liberalization, and Economic and Technical Cooperation for Sustained Growth and Equitable Development'. This rather lengthy and cumbersome theme was taken directly from the 'pillars' of TILF and ECOTECH of APEC and to reflect the need for gender integration into APEC's own agenda. Chaired by Dr. Amelia Ancog, Undersecretary for the Philippine Department of Science and Technology and Dr. Elena Lim, President of Solid Group of Companies and President of Women for Women (Phils. Inc.) that first meeting consisted of 60 invited women leaders representing 14 of the then 18 APEC member economies. Hosted by the National Council for the Role of Filipina Women with a multi economy organizing committee and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (Southeast Asia Gender Equity Program) and UNIFEM the Network was able to present its Call to Action directly to President Ramos of the Philippines who pledged to forward it to his fellow APEC Leaders in November.

Originally named the Network of Senior Women Leaders from APEC Economies to reflect the language used in 'Senior Officials' meetings, the core group agreed to rename the group as the Women Leaders Network of APEC and set plans to meet again in Canada in 1997. Since, then, women from all APEC economies have come together every year to ensure that women are fully integrated into the APEC process.

The original purpose of the WLN was stated as 'to seek ways and develop strategies so that women's concerns are heard, their aspirations considered, and their involvement firmly

established when decisions and policies are made within APEC'. Our first meeting specifically aimed to:

- Foster regional cooperation to advance the status of women in Asia and the Pacific;
- Formulate a framework for gender considerations to be included in developing human resources and in pursuing sustained growth and equitable development in the region;
- Organize a pool of experts to serve as partners and whose expertise could be tapped in identifying the gender dimension within APEC; and,
- Orient the participants on APEC and its structures and how these can be maximized as possible points for policy interventions.

At the end of the meeting, the Network presented President Ramos of the Philippines with a Challenge...A Call to Action for APEC Leaders to:

- Recognize and integrate gender as a cross-cutting theme in APEC
- Develop a partnership with the Network to identify mechanisms to achieve this objective; and
- Recognize the Network as a flexible, consultative forum and a strategic partner toward the achievement of the APEC vision, goals and action agendas.

What made this meeting and the Call to Action particularly successful is that the original concept for the Network had support at the highest levels of government. The NCRFW is the Women's Machinery in the Philippines and hence had the support of their government. The government of Canada signified its commitment and support by supplying most of the funding not just to establish the WLN but also to guarantee its existence and success for the inaugural meeting and the following four years – in total a five year commitment which involved more than \$1 million. In addition, the NCRFW ensured the success of this meeting by educating participants about APEC and the APEC process including the particular language that APEC officials use. Heavily involved in the process were senior Philippine APEC officials as well as the APEC Secretariat. The founding group worked with these officials into the early hours of the mornings to ensure that the wording on their Declaration was correct and we had complied with proper APEC protocol and procedures.

The second meeting of WLN was convened in Ottawa - Hull, Canada in September, 1997. The Network was now called Women Leaders Network of APEC and the theme for that year was chosen to coordinate with the theme for the SME Ministerial meeting: 'The Economic Impact of Women in the APEC Region'. Through the work of the multi-sectoral organizing committee chaired by Susan Davies, then Director of CIDA for Southeast Asia, there was a close collaboration with senior government officials throughout the entire year and which resulted in WLN being formally invited to make recommendations directly to the Ministers Responsible for SME's for the first time. WLN was co-chaired by:

- Huguette Labelle, President, CIDA, Co-chair
- Andrina Lever, President, Lever Enterprises, Co-chair
- Dr. Lorna Marsden, President, York University, Co-chair

and included the participation of 200 women leaders invited from 16 of the then 18 APEC economies. In addition to women leaders, for the first time one of the then three women members of ABAC (Dr. Dorothy Riddle) participated and there was participation by the Asia Development Bank, UNIFEM, and private sector sponsors. Four of Canada's most senior government Cabinet Ministers attended including the Minister for Foreign Affairs, then Minister for International Trade, the Honourable Sergio Marchi who confirmed the first Canadian all women's trade mission to the

United States to be held later in 1997, the Minister for Industry and the Minister for Status of Women Canada.

Funding was also provided for the first time by a combination of private and public sector support with additional support from civil society. In addition, WLN was expanded to include rural women, indigenous women and women with special needs in order to ensure that their special concerns and viewpoints were integrated

The form of the Declaration was 'From Action to Implementation' and was presented to the Canadian Minister for Industry Canada, the Honourable John Manley at a special lunch held on Parliament Hill in the very historic room where Canadian women were for the first time ruled to be 'persons' under the law of Canada and thus could hold public office, and the same room where we presented the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien with the conclusions of the Prime Minister's Task Force on Women Entrepreneurs in November, 2003. That WLN Declaration built on the 1996 Call to Action and focused on several overarching recommendations with specific attention to SME's, academia and science and technology. And, for the first time, WLN was invited to present its recommendations directly to the Ministers Responsible for SME's – a reflection of the need to work closely with our public service officials.

Since 1997, WLN meetings have been held in conjunction with each economy host as follows:

- 1998 – Malaysia
- 1999 – New Zealand
- 2000 – Brunei
- 2001 – China
- 2002 – Mexico
- 2003 – Thailand
- 2004 – Chile
- 2005 – Korea
- 2006 – Viet Nam

And we hope in the future with:

- 2007 – Australia
- 2008 – Peru
- 2009 – Singapore
- 2010 - Japan

We are so fortunate to know who the next four host economies for APEC will be and we need to think in longer terms – it is vital that we get the women and future chairs of WLN for these four years engaged NOW. We need to go back to our original model which was taken from the APEC structure of the present Chair working closely with the immediate past and future chairs. And, if these women or economies are not represented here, then we still need to engage them fully and ensure that they are at the next WLN meeting. This will give us the continuity we require.

So how does WLN really work or how is it supposed to work and what makes it so unique? WLN is a loose network which is flexible and consists of a multi-sectoral approach to recommendations. The idea being that in order to facilitate change, we must all work together and interact and that the private sector and the public sector must work together in order to satisfy each other's needs in an equitable and efficient way with equal input from academia and civil society and that the unique view points of women with special needs or interests should be included in order to ensure a balanced perspective. Policy makers cannot work in isolation – they need our input.

In order for WLN to succeed there needs to be the highest level of commitment. Women participants have to be leaders in their sector and in their community – women who have access to decision makers and ‘spheres of influence’ and women who are willing to use their access in order to ensure that WLN and other women who do not have access are fairly represented within all APEC fora and in individual economies and now more and more in other international fora such as the WTO. There also needs to be a high level commitment within the government and with the host economy to support WLN and their meetings and their recommendations and not just lip service. WLN is not just a photo opportunity to be used by APEC economies and should not be used as such. Therefore it is necessary for the host economy in particular to work closely with its own APEC officials and to have representation at APEC and WLN meetings. It is also necessary to have representation from the APEC Secretariat in order to assist in the drafting of WLN statements and declarations. WLN participants are not expected to be experts on APEC, APEC protocol or certainly the unique language of APEC policy so it is essential that there is participation from the APEC Secretariat and other officials to ensure that the WLN statements and recommendations are within the mandate of the Ministers they are directed to and written in the language of APEC and consistent with other APEC documents. The language of APEC is not the same as that used at other international fora such as the United Nations.

And, finally, there needs to be the consistent commitment and involvement from WLN participants. WLN is not a one time a year event or conference. It is a living, breathing network that comes together once a year to review its progress and to make presentations to Ministers. However, that is only the smallest part of WLN’s role. In order to ensure the success of WLN and its recommendations, it is necessary for each WLN member to continue to interact with its own officials to ensure that recommendations and the work of WLN are not buried but are acted upon. Too often, WLN participants treat the annual meeting as a conference or a reunion but do nothing throughout the year to continue to promote and lobby for the recommendations submitted at its annual meeting or hold their own officials accountable for responding to the WLN recommendations. Even if all APEC economies do not take up our recommendations, we need to work to ensure that at least our own individual economies do.

Since 1996, WLN can be proud of its achievements. It is easy for those not involved to criticize or to comment that WLN has been ineffective but that is not so. Just the fact that APEC is still the ONLY multi-lateral fora that has a women’s advisory group that has been able to meet once a year for ten years makes it a very unique entity and one that needs to be built upon. Some of our successes include:

- Successfully launching with the support of the APEC Leaders!
- Creating awareness of the role of women
- 10 years of successful meetings despite no core funding and not being an official part of APEC
- 2 Ministerial Meetings for Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs
- The creation of AGGI (Ad hoc Group on Gender Integration)
- Implementing gender training
- The creation of Gender Focal Point Network
- Best practice recognition at the OECD, Commonwealth Secretariat and other international fora
- Our access to Ministers
- The participation and education of more than 4000 women in ten years
- Recognition of the ‘unique contribution of indigenous women’ for the first time in any trade document at the 1999 APEC Trade Ministers in Auckland, New Zealand
- Recognition by other fora
- The creation of the Microenterprise subworking group of the APEC SME Working Group

But WLN cannot just rest on its laurels. We have to face the next decade with optimism, energy, goals and a vision. We have lost many of our very high powered women leaders from the early days. In addition,

- We have not really grown
- Our credibility is in doubt by some fora
- We still have no consistency
- We are still losing women of the highest influence
- We suffer from a lack of coordination and continuity
- We still do not have a central archive, website or secretariat
- We still have no core funding
- And we suffer from stagnant government cooperation

The vision of the original founders of WLN was to create a network of women of influence and leaders willing to use their position to influence both domestic and APEC policy makers. Yes, it was elitist but we recognized that in order to help women who could not speak for themselves then we had to aim for women at the highest levels who already had a voice to speak for other women. It was always intended to be a loose network that can adjust and 'morph' as its needs and focus change rather than a formal NGO. The vision included women working at the highest levels in order to ensure success and that the women who can not speak for themselves or do not have access to decision makers will not be forgotten and will be spoken for.

WLN is not an annual conference. It is a network that comes together on an annual basis to develop recommendations for APEC Leaders and Ministers. It is a network which must continue to work together throughout the year and maintain the momentum and goodwill created at its annual meeting. WLN meetings should not be stand alone but rather build on the previous meetings and need to be consistent with the themes and topics identified by the Ministers and Leaders for each particular year. WLN needs to 'raise' its level of activity and broaden its perspective to include even the most sophisticated issues that other APEC fora are grappling with, such as world trade, international security, regional free trade agreements, the service sector, the movement of people and goods, emergency response, HIV/AIDS and other health threats

WLN is still not an official part of APEC but rather exists at the invitation of the host economy. This was done intentionally because to be an official part of APEC, WLN would have to comply with certain rather strict issues of protocol. Existing outside of APEC's formal structure has been both a positive and a negative factor. It is vital that we retain our independence and not allow ourselves to be used as a tool by any government or group for private or political agendas. By not being official, we are not bound by the APEC constrictions. However, it does make funding and other recognition issues more difficult especially outside of APEC.

Later in the week during this meeting, we shall be attending a special session on the second decade of WLN. I hope that you shall all think about what you would like WLN to achieve in the next decade and come to that session with energy and ideas and commitment to the years ahead. So looking ahead, let me sum up my vision for WLN going forward:

- Let's build on our past achievements to solidify the base of WLN by:
 - Establishing a secretariat and therefore achieving continuity and ongoing support for the chairs and hosts
 - Establish and maintain our database – a valuable source of expertise and connections

- Let's breathe life into all sectors of WLN, not just the businesswomen, but let's develop connectors for the academics, the NGO's, the public sector participants, the indigenous women and all of us
- Let's set some actionable goals and start to develop strategies and how to achieve and implement them
- Let's develop teams and commitments for those goals
- Let's agree to keep the dream alive
- Let's welcome the next generation of young women leaders – we need to pass this torch!

My vision includes a WLN that has and responsibly uses its access to high level government officials; a WLN that can create a connection to ensure that women's voices are heard on all major issues, one where when women are at risk, then the WLN has the credibility to be called upon to act and assist; a WLN that can come together or connect to assist women in times of emergency such as the tsunami, a WLN where we are friends and where we can help build a better world during these troubled and stressful times.

Over the next few days, we shall meet and experience the outstanding hospitality and beauty of our gracious Vietnamese hostesses. We'll work together and celebrate with our new friends and our old friends. We may disagree but we will finally approve our statement and recommendations to go forward to the Ministers. But towards the end, our hosts for this year have wisely set aside that special session to discuss and set the trail for our journey for the next decade. Over the next few days, please think of your own vision for WLN and come prepared to help promote and build that vision. After all, WLN is all of you.

In closing I would like to refer to another quote which for me sums up why we must keep the dream of WLN alive:

'They (women) don't have to suffer as much since they can integrate and join forces with other women, build support, build networks, and eventually build themselves up'. (Earth News, Rabya Nizam)

And finally, to our hosts, who have been so supportive of WLN since Vietnam was admitted as a full member of APEC in 1999 and who have worked so hard so make this meeting a success, thank you for inviting me to speak, thank you for welcoming us to your beautiful country and I wish all of us a series of very successful and happy meetings and conclusions over the next few days. Thank you.